

## Part 1 Chapter 2

### The role of the facilitator

In an earlier book, *The Zen of Groups*, we describe the role of the facilitator as a leadership role in which the facilitator's job is to guide the group process towards the achievement of the group's agreed purpose. In a fully effective group, each participant may have the skills and experience to facilitate the group and the role may be rotated. In practice, the skills associated with group facilitation are not always well-known, and the facilitator may be the person (or persons) in the group who has facilitation skills. An external facilitator may also be brought in by the group to play this role.

The facilitator is an aware and conscious listener, and a clear communicator, who understands group dynamics and provides process expertise, usually in the form of questions and suggestions. She/he grows meaningful relationships, participation and collaboration, focuses a group on its purpose and guides its development through organic cycles, using cooperative processes and collective decision making. The facilitator is also impartial and does not get involved in the content of the group deliberations.

The facilitator is chosen by and accountable to the group — he/she is not imposed without agreement. Sometimes, for example in a public consultation process, this can be challenging, and involves conferring with representatives of the groups involved rather than all the individuals.

These descriptions of the role of the facilitator are somewhat similar to the role of a chairperson in a democratic majority voting committee, since a chairperson is also in charge of process and responsible for following group rules. However, unlike a chairperson, who has a vote (and sometimes an extra casting vote if numbers are tied), a facilitator does not have a vote at all, or any direct or indirect say in the content of decisions that are made.

The psychologist Carl Rogers, who was a pioneer of facilitation, describes the role of facilitator as follows:

- The facilitator is genuinely free of a desire to impose ready-made truths or to control the outcome.
- The facilitator has skills in helping people engage in genuine dialogue.
- The facilitator respects the capacity of the group to discover the nature of their own problems and has the skills in helping people to express that capacity.
- A respectful hearing is given to all attitudes and feelings, no matter how 'extreme' or 'unrealistic'.

The members of a group are permitted to choose, collectively and individually, their own processes and towards their own goals. If these conditions apply, then a process is set in motion that has certain characteristics.

### **The Process**

Long-suppressed feelings will surface, many of them angry and bitter. Because these feelings are accepted and not judged, more people will express themselves, and the range of feelings will widen.

As people become vocal, visible and known, trust and mutual respect will be strengthened.

Irrational feelings lose their power, both by being fully expressed, and by feedback from others.

Feelings based in common experience are clarified and strengthened, leading to a greater self, and group, confidence.

Collective understandings become more realistic and less irrational.

Power struggles between members are resolved, and collaboration increases.

Actions emerge that are aimed at changing the existing situation. In a good group, these actions will be innovative and transformational, as well as realistic.

Group solidarity is strong enough to support individuals to take even radical action.<sup>1</sup>

Carl Rogers' description recognises the place of the emotional and instinctive in human behaviour. This fits well with recent advances in neuroscience that recognise the functions of the instinctive reptilian brain, the limbic brain (the seat of emotions) and the neo-cortex (where language, logic and ability to manipulate numbers reside). Recent neuroscience research by Candice Pert also shows an inevitable connection between thoughts and emotions through the chemical charges released in the brain.<sup>2</sup>

In the books on facilitation that are now available, the role of the facilitator is described in a variety of ways. Here are some of these descriptions, dating from 1967 to the present day.

. . . a leader is needed who plays a role quite different from that of the members . . . This type of approach to group processes places the leader in a particular role in which he must cease to contribute, avoid evaluation, and refrain from thinking about solutions or group products. Instead he must concentrate on the group process, listen in order to understand rather than to appraise or refute, assume responsibility for accurate communication between members, be sensitive to

unexpressed feelings, protect minority points of view, keep the discussion moving, and develop skills in summarising.

— Norman R.F. Maier<sup>3</sup>

To facilitate means 'to make easy.' The group facilitator's job is to make it easier for the group to do its work. By providing non-directive leadership, the facilitator helps the group arrive at the understandings and decisions that are its task. In a consensus group the facilitator's focus is on the group and its work. The role is one of assistance and guidance, not of control.

— Michel Avery et al.<sup>4</sup>

The primary role of a facilitator is to assist parties to have a constructive dialogue. Facilitators usually help groups set an agenda and manage the process of discussion . . . For example, facilitators help the parties to recognise how their own styles of interacting or the institutional prejudices that they embody may interfere with constructive problem solving. Here the objective is to promote understanding among the parties. Additionally, facilitators may propose a series of process steps to keep the discussion on target. Facilitators may also explicitly help parties find a mutually agreeable solution to a dispute.

— Barbara Gray<sup>5</sup>

. . . a facilitator is a person who helps a group free itself from internal obstacles or difficulties so that it may more efficiently and effectively pursue the achievement of its desired outcomes for a given meeting . . . In the purest sense, when wearing the 'facilitator's hat' an individual acts as a neutral servant of the people. By that I mean the person focuses on guiding without directing; bringing about action without disruption; helping people self-discover new approaches and solutions to problems; knocking down walls which have been built between people while preserving structures of value; and, above all, appreciating people as people. All of this must be done without leaving any fingerprints.

— Thomas Kayser<sup>6</sup>

The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements.

— Sam Kaner et al.<sup>7</sup>

Facilitation is the design and management of structures and processes that help a group do its work and minimise the common problems people have working together. Facilitation is therefore a neutral process (with respect to the content and participants) that focuses on: what needs to be done; who needs to be involved; design, flow, and

sequence of tasks; communication patterns, effectiveness, and completeness; appropriate levels of participation and the use of resources; group energy, momentum, and capability; the physical and psychological environment.

— Tom Justice and David Jamieson<sup>8</sup>

A facilitator . . . is a process guide; he or she does not evaluate or contribute substantive ideas to a discussion. The facilitator is the servant of the group, not its leader, and works to ensure that the group accomplishes its goals. He or she does this by offering process suggestions, enforcing ground rules agreed to by the group. Keeping discussions on track, protecting group member from attack, and ensuring that all members participate.

— David Straus<sup>9</sup>

Roger Schwarz, a leading contemporary writer on facilitation, takes a group-centred approach:

Group facilitation is a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of a group, substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority, intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems, and makes decisions, in order to increase the group's effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

Schwarz divides facilitation into basic and developmental facilitation. The two approaches imply different roles for the facilitator. In basic facilitation, although the group may influence the process at any time, in general it expects the facilitator to guide it using what he or she considers effective process. In development facilitation, members expect to monitor and guide the group's process, and expect the facilitator to teach them how to accomplish this goal.

Schwarz also stresses that facilitation is value-based, and that these values guide effective group behaviour, and effective facilitator behaviour. He lists the key values as valid information (sharing and understanding information), free and informed choice, and internal commitment to these choices (people being personally responsible for the choices they make as part of the group). In 2002, in a new edition of his book *The Skilled Facilitator*, Schwarz added a fourth core value, that of compassion.

Facilitators enable groups to improve their process by helping them to act in ways that are consistent with these core values. In development facilitation, Schwarz finds that over time the group members develop the ability to identify when they have acted in ways that are inconsistent with their core values, and to correct their behaviour — without a facilitator's help. In basic facilitation, the group uses a facilitator to help it act consistently with the core values, temporarily, while working with the facilitator.

On a different tack, Harrison Owen, the inventor of the facilitation method known as Open Space, describes the facilitator's role as facilitating the journey of spirit using mythos (story) as a key.<sup>11</sup> Form follows spirit.<sup>12</sup> 'Spirit cannot be bought, ordered, directed. It responds positively to a very different treatment called *inspiration*.'

### **Co-facilitators**

The role of the facilitator is not always that taken by one person alone. There are times when the role is shared. Three common ways are:

- Two or more facilitators work together as equals.
- One facilitator takes the primary role and has one or more assistant facilitators, who are often in training with the primary facilitator.
- One primary facilitator and a number of secondary facilitators who facilitate smaller break-out groups as needed.

In all these scenarios the facilitators need to clearly and transparently negotiate and monitor their various roles, and make these transparent to the participants. Any unclear or manipulative power relationships will undermine the 'power with' value base of facilitation and lead to problems and confusion in the whole group. Particularly in longer workshops and organisational interventions over time, lack of role clarity can undermine the effectiveness of the facilitation.

On the other hand, when it is done well, co-facilitation can model an effortless weaving of energies and interactions that appear seamless. Effective co-facilitation by people of different genders, cultures and abilities can be inspirational. The benefits of co-facilitation include sharing of work tasks, increased collective intelligence, and better monitoring of the group dynamic. Another important benefit of co-facilitation is the deflection of negative projections onto a facilitator from group participants. Participants can unconsciously project onto the facilitator(s) perceptions related to past relationship distress (often involving the family of origin or early authority figures). Strong projections can sometimes weaken the effectiveness of a facilitator's work, and understanding this dynamic is an important part of facilitator training (see 'Identity check, Process 43', page 285).

Co-facilitation can interrupt this negative dynamic by providing alternative personalities with whom participants can relate. In some highly charged situations co-facilitation is undertaken specifically for this reason. For example, groups or organisations in which there are ethnic or religious tensions may need a mix of facilitators that mirror the group or organisational diversity.

### **Facilitator and facilitative**

I have described the role of the facilitator in some depth, but some further clarification is needed. It is important to distinguish between a facilitator as a practitioner and someone who is facilitative, i.e. acting in a facilitative way.

Almost anyone can be facilitative if they seek to provide space for others to build relationships, think and reflect, exercise choice and express their creative potential. For example, teachers, leaders and parents can all be and hopefully often are facilitative. They listen, encourage, and support others to become their full selves. The limits to being facilitative would be in situations where choices have already been denied or severely curtailed. An extreme example would be that of facilitating with people in prison.

There are some disciplines where facilitative skills are regularly used and highly regarded. These include mediation, teaching or training, coaching, group psychotherapy and some kinds of leadership. Facilitators are often asked what the difference is between their discipline and these other disciplines, so I will address this here.

### *Mediator*

Professional mediation has been in use longer than facilitation and is well established internationally. Mediation is used at all levels of society, from neighbourhood disputes over boundary fencing through to disputing and warring nations. The mediator guides the process of two or more opposing parties (individuals or groups) towards an agreement which the parties design themselves. The mediator does not make a decision on behalf of, or for, the parties. The skills of mediation are allied to those of facilitation in that both are process guides.

The main differences are that a mediator works between the opposing parties or groups when they are unwilling to talk or engage with one another directly. A mediator 'mediates' a dispute. In addition the mediator works specifically in the area of conflict. A conflict can be assumed, otherwise a mediator will not be required.

Although a facilitator also works with conflict, this is only part of their role. The facilitator works within the context of a group or organisation and is involved in process of all kinds, including many that do not relate to conflict.

#### *Teacher or trainer*

A teacher or trainer has as their primary role the transferring of information or knowledge to individual participants. The trainer or teacher also needs to manage the group process while this individual learning is taking place. A teacher can be very facilitative, and this is naturally to be encouraged. However, the primary role is individual learning within a particular sphere of knowledge.

The difference between a facilitator and a trainer is that a trainer or teacher's job is to transfer knowledge to individuals. The individual's learning is likely to be assessed in some way by the teacher. The teacher needs to focus on individual learning more than the group dynamic. A facilitator works primarily with the group dynamic and is not involved in assessing individual performance. This is done by the group itself, or possibly by some other party outside the group.

It is unfortunate that trainers are often called facilitators, as this muddies the waters for facilitators who work with group process only.

A further confusion arises when people are being trained as facilitators; i.e. being taught how to facilitate. A facilitator who trains other facilitators is necessarily placed in the role of teacher, and needs to make the differences between facilitation and training clear to those she/he is teaching.

#### *Coach*

A coach is very similar in skills and approach to a facilitator. Coaching is indeed part of the facilitator's role, particularly when it relates to encouraging an individual to plan and implement goals.

A business of life coach usually works with an individual. However, a coach can also be involved with a work, sporting or other team.

I tend to put facilitation and coaching close together on a continuum of skill sets, particularly when referring to team coaching. However, coaching in its traditional role, as in sports coaching, can include choosing the team and firing individuals, which is never part of the facilitator's role.

### *Manager*

A manager in a traditional organisation is often the role name for someone with positional power over a group of people, including the right to assess performance and 'hire and fire'. However, the term 'manager' can also refer to someone with little or no positional power, and a particular role which involves managing the workflow of others. For example, successful creative people and sportspeople are likely to hire personal managers.

Whatever the definition of the manager, there is certainly a place for them to be facilitative, particularly if the power relationship is loaded unequally.

### *Group therapist*

A group therapist or psychotherapist has the primary role of creating personal healing with individuals and is likely to be very facilitative when working in a group. For example, a group psychotherapist will need to build the group so that it is safe enough for the participants to reveal themselves to each other.

A group psychotherapist will work with participants who are not expected to have the same knowledge about human development, and may work with the group for a long period of time. In some groups, such as violence prevention groups, the participants will have been court ordered to attend; in this case the psychotherapist also has the power associated with required attendance and lack of choice.

Psychotherapists have their own codes of ethics, and generally these codes make the relationship boundaries very explicit in order to protect the rights of participants.

### *Leader*

Leadership is a term that has a very wide range of interpretations; it is a generic term and is not often well-defined. If someone takes initiative and others follow then we can see that there is a leader. If someone takes initiative and others don't follow, there is no leader.

A leader may be charismatic, inspirational, ruthless, coercive or brutal. We often describe leaders as good or bad. Certainly leadership requires followers, so perhaps the less need for leadership the better, as this could mean that everyone is thinking and acting proactively in an aligned way.

A facilitator is in a situational leadership role. This is the kind of leader who will take initiative at times but is always looking to empower the group and encourage initiative and alignment within it. An effective leader may also be facilitative and exercise many of the skills of a facilitator. A leadership role similar to that of a facilitator is that of the 'servant leader', as described by Robert Greenleaf in his book *Servant-Leadership*.

However, a leader who has a designated position of some kind is likely to be using other skills in addition to those of a facilitator. This may include exercising power over others, deciding for them, and influencing them to go in a certain direction which is favoured by the leader or some outside agency.

### **What's next?**

These descriptions and comparisons of the role of the facilitator are interesting because they help to illustrate the development of the role over time, and the efforts of practitioners to explain what they do.

While explaining or describing the role of facilitator is helpful, a framework or 'architecture' for facilitation is also essential. In the next chapter I describe a frame work that has been developed by Zenergy and is used in our facilitator training programmes.

### **References**

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5. Barbara Gray, *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems*, p. 163.
6. Thomas Kayser, *Mining Group Gold*, p. 12.
7. Sam Kaner et al., *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decisionmaking*, p. 32.
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10. R. Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator*, pp. 4–9.
11. Harrison Owen, *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations*, p. 48.
12. Harrison Owen, *The Millennium Organization*.
13. R.K. Greenleaf, *Servant-Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*.